

YOUR MIND,

YOUR CHOICE

BY TODD A. SONES

I recently had the opportunity to observe sport psychologist, Dr. Glenn Albaugh, working with PGA Tour player, Scott McCarron. It was an interesting exchange. Scott was playing his 10th hole, a long par 4 in which he hit a poor approach shot, followed by a fat chip and then, to top it off, missed a makeable par saving putt. After listening to Scott's negative self-talk, Glen walked up to Scott and said, "You hit a crappy iron shot, followed by a lousy chip shot and a miserable putt." Scott

was noticeably surprised and confused by Glenn's comment since he wasn't used to hearing Glenn talk so negatively. Glenn's next question to Scott was "How long would you keep me around if I talked to you that way?" Scott answered "Not very long, I would fire you." With that Glenn replied, "Well then, why the heck are you talking to yourself that way?"

Scott has worked very hard on his focus and concentration in both practice and play. He has learned how to stay in the present. But like

the rest of us, he is also human and we are all going to have negative thoughts creep into our minds during a round of golf. One thing that helps champions succeed is how they react to negative or distracting thoughts. After being reminded of how he was thinking, Scott refocused his mind and finished his round, shooting a course record of 67.

Scott's successful refocusing isn't an inherent gift, but rather a learned skill. There are five main steps to take in order to improve your mental game.

1 The first step to improving your focus and your concentration is embracing the fact that your mind is just that, your mind and you have a choice as to how you think and react to any situation on the golf course. Ultimately, it's up to you and only you as to how well you perform mentally throughout your round of golf.

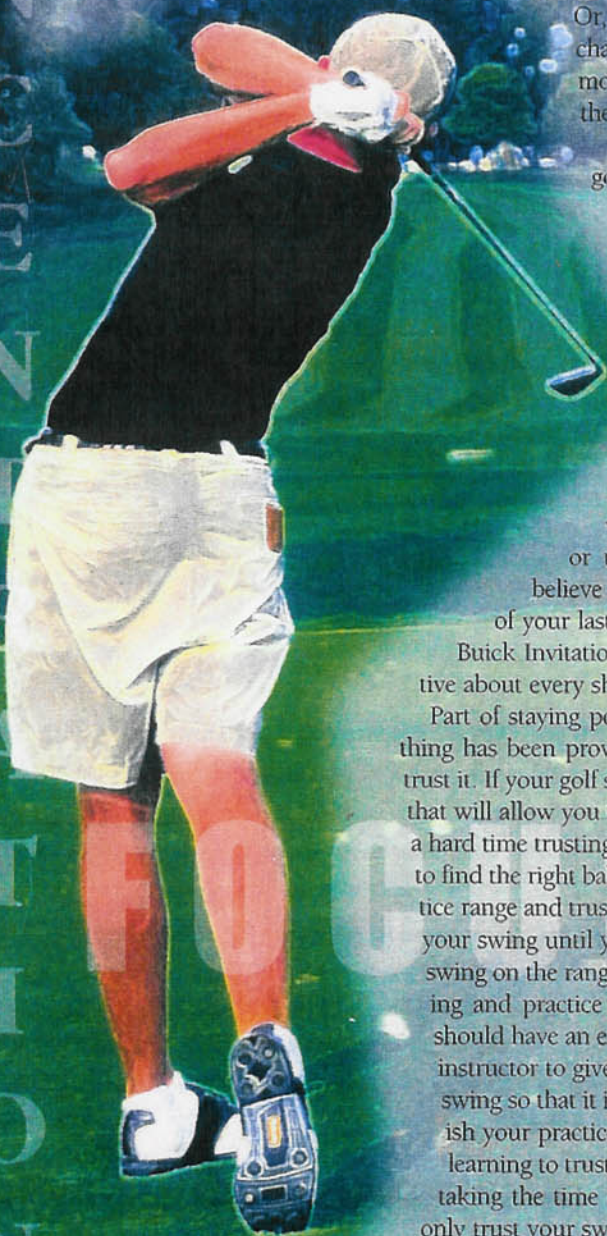
2 Once you've taken responsibility for your mental skills, the next step to improvement is awareness. To become aware of how well you focus, make a mental scorecard at the conclusion of your rounds. First access how well you stayed in the present versus thinking about the past or the future. Thoughts about the past might include telling yourself "how in the world could I have three-putted or a double bogeyed the last hole." Thoughts about the future might be telling yourself "if I

par the last hole I would break 80 for the first time in my life." Or, "if I shoot 85 today, I'll win the first flight in the club championship." In golf, it's always best to stay in the moment. You have one objective, to focus and commit to the next shot. There is no past or future, just the next shot.

If you think about the times you've played your best golf, it's usually when you're only focussed on the next shot and more specifically, the target. The target is the key to your concentration. By being aware of your thinking patterns, you can develop the ability to shut everything out of your mind and focus on the target.

3 The third step in improving your mental game is to access how positive or negative you stay during your whole round. Do you allow yourself to become negative or untrusting after a couple of bad shots? Or, do you believe you're always going to hit the next shot well, regardless of your last shot? Chip Beck once told me that when he won the Buick Invitational, he only had one goal . . . to find something positive about every shot he hit that week.

Part of staying positive is being able to trust. Trust comes when something has been proven to you and you consciously make the decision to trust it. If your golf swing is not trustworthy enough to hit the type of shots that will allow you to play to your desired level, then you're going to have a hard time trusting it throughout a round of golf. Players at all levels have to find the right balance between working on their golf swing on the practice range and trusting it on the golf course. The key is not to wait to trust your swing until you get on the course, but rather practice trusting your swing on the range. There are two basic ways to practice... practice training and practice trusting. When you're training your golf swing, you should have an exact plan. Most often it will take the help of a qualified instructor to give you the direction you need in order to train your golf swing so that it is trustworthy. After you've trained your golf swing, finish your practice sessions by going through your pre-shot routine and learning to trust that the training you've done will work. Over time, by taking the time to practice trusting your swing, you will learn to not only trust your swing on the range, but also on the golf course and, ultimately, you will be able to stay positive throughout your round of golf.



4 The next step is to ask yourself how distracted you allow yourself to get by influences you have no control over. Examples of these influences include playing partners, golf course obstacles and weather conditions. Your job when playing golf is to control the things you can control... yourself and your mind. You can do nothing about your playing partners, the weather, or the out of bounds area on your right, so don't allow yourself to be distracted by them. Use your pre-shot routine to help you focus on the target and play your own game.

5 The final step is to evaluate your golf course ego. Do you often choose the shot you could only make one in ten times or do you choose the shot you would make nine out of ten times? Bob Rotella, a noted sports psychologist, said "choose your shot conservatively so that you can swing confidently and aggressively." Jack Nicklaus is known by his peers to be disciplined in never playing a shot he hadn't practiced or was confident in executing.

The key to controlling your ego is to learn to control your emotions. David Duval is a great example of a player who has total control over his emotions. He never shows any emotion of being overly excited or angry. He remains cool and confident throughout his rounds. When your emotions control you, you typically try to make a miracle shot after a bad shot and end up compounding one mistake with another. Sound familiar? Learn not to make decisions based on emotions, but rather choose the shot that you would choose if you weren't reacting to your last shot or even your last hole. Remember, controlling your emotions is a learned skill that takes discipline and self-control.

In conclusion, try not to lose sight of the fact that it's your mind and your choice. You control how you think on the golf course. The most important step to take to improve your concentration when you play golf is to make the commitment to understand your mental mistakes and replace them with solid mental skills. Identify the problem areas in your mental game and start working on them. Developing mental skills is like developing any other skill; it takes time, practice, patience and perseverance. When you try something and you fail, consider it an opportunity to learn, become stronger, and improve. Failure makes champions stronger. By being able to concentrate while on the golf course, and stay in the present, you will be able to develop a strong mental game. But, most of all, keep things in perspective – It's only golf!

Todd Sones is the Director of Golf at White Deer Run. If you have questions regarding your golf game, please call 888-615-8094.

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